

James A. Henretta

## *Wealth, Authority, and Power*

### **The Evolution of the Southern Aristocracy**

The presence of black slaves at the bottom of the social scale had a large, perhaps even a determinative, effect on the nature of white society. Before 1670 there had been relatively few blacks resident in the Chesapeake region, certainly not more than 5 percent of the total population, and not all of them were bound to hereditary lifetime service. From the very first, Africans had been perceived by whites as racially distinct and culturally different; but initially they had been treated in law in much the same manner as indentured servants from Europe. Then, rather suddenly, their status was completely undermined. A series of laws passed between 1667 and 1671 stated that conversion to Christianity did not relieve a black of his bondage. At the same time it became clear that Africans, and their children, served for life rather than for a specific period of years; and that color was the single defining feature of their status as slaves. By the end of the seventeenth century all of the southern American colonies had outlawed miscegenation: to be black or brown was to be a chattel slave, the personal property of one who was white and free.

Just at the time that this general debasement of blacks was taking place, the lines of class and status in white society were taking on a more coherent and a more permanent form. The high prices paid for Chesapeake tobacco during the first half-century of settlement had brought quick fortunes to those privileged colonists, many of them the younger sons of London merchants and bureaucrats, with large land grants and many indentured servants. The growing economic cleavages in Chesapeake society were accentuated by the falling price of tobacco after 1660, which struck particularly hard at the small yeoman farmers with limited capital resources, and by the attempts

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of certain leading families to appropriate control of government on the local and provincial levels.

In 1675 social discontent helped to precipitate an armed uprising led by Nathaniel Bacon, an ambitious planter of good connections and considerable means. The laws passed by Bacon's Assembly sought to limit the political power of important families on the county level by broadening the suffrage to include tenants and by creating elective posts to offset the power of appointed magistrates. Other laws, conceived and supported by the very families whose local predominance was under attack from below, attempted to combat the growing influence of the provincial council and its domination by a few families favored by the royal governor. The appointive powers of the governor were drastically limited while provincial councillors were excluded from the county courts and their tax exemptions were revoked.

Bacon's Assembly was ousted within a year, and the reform programs (especially on the local level) were as abortive as the revolt itself. Within a few decades it became generally accepted that certain established families were destined to be preeminent in wealth and power. During these same years the once-prevalent fear among the landed classes that white and black servants would rise together in rebellion gradually vanished; the fastening of a subordinate status on Africans had ensured that all white men would stand together. Subsequently, the social distance between black and white was to appear far greater than the social or economic inequalities among the classes of the white population.

The reasons for the simultaneous emergence of a caste and a class society in the Chesapeake are not completely clear, but this much is certain: In 1700, as throughout southern history, the extensive ownership of slaves and the expropriation of the produce of their labor was the prerogative of a privileged minority. There were about 3,000 slaves in Maryland at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but they were owned by only about 1,000 to 1,250 whites—less than one-fourth of the 5,000–6,000 white households in the province. The probate records in Maryland during the 1690s reveal that 75 percent of the planters whose wills were probated held property assessed at less than £100 sterling. Not only were these men too poor to own a slave or an indentured servant, but over one-third of them were landless and had to lease the very soil they worked. Shipping 1,200 to 3,000 pounds of tobacco each year (worth £6 to £15 sterling), this tarnished residue of the once-proud yeoman class scraped along at a subsistence level, often deeply in debt to the local storekeeper or moneylender.

A second distinct group in the white population was that 20 percent whose estates at probate were valued at £100 to £500 sterling. During their lifetimes most of these men had owned slaves—usually from one to five—and so had a vested interest in the perpetuation of the system. The labor of their black workers or, less often, investment in land or in a store had lifted these families above the majority of poor white planters. But social prestige and political power cluded these men as well. These honors were reserved,

in the main, for the wealthiest 5 percent of the white population, the members of the 250 households who owned from a quarter to a third of all the slaves and who controlled the bulk of the wealth of the society.

During the first half of the eighteenth century the proportion of slaves in the total population increased dramatically (from 20 to 40 percent in Virginia and from 11 to 30 percent in Maryland). This development, the result of high rates of natural increase and of a significant increase in slave importation, had an important effect on the social structure of the white community. A greater proportion of whites employed slave labor. By the 1730s only 55 percent of the probated estates were assessed at less than £100 sterling, as compared to 75 percent a generation before. Nearly half of the white planters now had sufficient resources to own a slave (although not this many actually did). Even taking into account the rise in prices—which meant that £100 sterling was worth less in actual purchasing power—there had been a significant increase in the prosperity of the white population, but (interestingly enough) this general improvement had not resulted in greater equality within the white community.

Indeed, just the opposite, for the dimensions of the upper class expanded—in numbers and in wealth. In the 1690s the Great Planters of Maryland, those who at their deaths had estates worth £1,000 or more, constituted only 1.5 percent of those whose wills were probated. This proportion rose steadily: to 2.2 percent during the 1720s; to 3.6 percent during the 1730s; and to 3.9 percent of the total sample during the 1750s. The white population of Maryland had increased four-fold during these six decades, but the number of Great Planters had grown by a factor of ten. The wealth generated by the use of more slaves and the expansion of the tobacco industry had not been diffused equally among the members of the white community but had helped to create a relatively large class of wealthy planters.

Many of the members of this elite group were related by blood or marriage to those Great Planters who had established their predominance during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The unique feature of the landed aristocracy of the Chesapeake was its ability to perpetuate its control over a society that was rapidly expanding, both in numbers and in geographic area. The total number of white households in Virginia increased from about 6,000 in 1700 to 80,000 in 1790, but economic wealth and political power resided in the hands of the same family clans at the end of this period as at the beginning. In the decades preceding the war for independence no less than 70 percent of the 110 leaders of the Virginia House of Burgesses were drawn from families resident in Virginia before 1690.

The remarkable success of the Great Planters of Virginia in preserving and extending the power of their families was the result of high rates of reproduction (which provided an ample supply of sons to take over family lands and of daughters to marry into established or rapidly rising families) and also of the system by which the resources of the family were transmitted from one generation to the next. The estate of the father did not pass to the eldest

son (as among the aristocracy of eighteenth-century England) leaving younger sons to find their fortunes in law, government, or the church. It was, instead, distributed among all of his male and female offspring. . . .

As these sons and daughters took up residence on the lands accumulated for them by the economic success and political acumen of their father, the family extended its influence into new localities. And this expansion more than matched the numerical and geographical growth of the colony as a whole. In the end, the weight of these established families came to press, like the atmosphere itself, evenly over the whole face of Virginia. (A similar proliferation of the upper classes had taken place in England during the sixteenth century, also during a period of rapid population growth.) Of the 100 wealthiest men in the state in 1787, all except four owned lands in at least two counties, and more than half had estates in at least four counties. There was a certain irony in this development; for the practice of partible inheritance had produced both a greater equality within the ranks of the wealthy families and a greater disparity between the resources of these clans and the rest of the population. Seven members of the Carter family, the richest of all the clans, owned a total of 170,000 acres of land and 2,300 slaves scattered over seven different counties. They were joined, as members of the privileged one hundred, by nine members of Cocke family, eight Fitzhughs, seven Harisons, eight Lees, seven Randolphs, and eight Washingtons.

It was this small homogeneous elite—English by descent, Anglican in religion, and linked to one another by ties of kinship and bonds of economic interest—which monopolized the political life of Virginia during the eighteenth century. There were seven members of the Lee family, all of the same generation, sitting in the Virginia assembly in the 1750s and representing five different counties. And the majority of all of the leaders of the House of Burgesses between 1720 and 1775, the men who sat on the important committees and dominated the debates, were related by blood or marriage to one or another of the dozen or so great family clans. That 60 percent of the white adult males had sufficient property to vote and that 45 percent of them regularly exercised the franchise was irrelevant given this concentration of hereditary power. In this deferential society the mass of poor white planters acquiesced in the decisions of their betters and submitted meekly to their rule. . . .

The children of the poor white planter sensed what their parents knew all too well: that they occupied an inferior place in the social hierarchy and should act accordingly. "We were accustomed to look upon, what were called gentle folks, as beings of a superior order," recalled the Reverend Devereux Jaratt, the son of a carpenter who eventually rose to a position of authority within the Church of England. . . . The consciousness of social inferiority, inculcated in childhood to such an extent that it induced physical fear, became an enduring part of the behavior patterns (and perhaps even the personalities) of thousands of poor whites. Wherever they went, in the town or in the fields, in public or private, these men and women carried the stigma of

subordinate rank with them: in their halting speech, gnarled hands, and emaciated faces. They were deferential to those above them and—especially when emboldened by drink or by numbers—harshly demanded respect from slaves and servants, whom they could consider as their social inferiors.

A hierarchical and authoritarian pattern of personal relationships had come to characterize southern colonial society by 1700, and it persisted for more than a century and a half because the conduct it sanctioned corresponded to the actual distribution of power and influence in the community. The existence of these established role expectations, these shared experiences and assumptions, also helped to perpetuate that system. The "difference between gentle and simple" which Jaratt testified was "universal among all of my age and rank," had become part of the social environment, accepted by the inhabitants as immutable and correct. Anchored in the child-training and socialization process and solidified by the institutionalized roles of adult life, this pattern of relationships came to form an integral part of the sense of identity of thousands of adult individuals. The congruence between the social structure and the personalities of those who composed it was not exact; in this, as in any society, there was a great deal of "slippage," as the mobility achieved by Jaratt himself clearly demonstrated. And, yet, the strength and pervasiveness of these role expectations and values worked constantly to inhibit any widespread intellectual or personal challenge to the existing system. They became, in a very real sense, the social chains which bound this stratified society together. The shackles of psychological dependence and subordination had come to bind the minds of poor whites as tightly as iron chains bound the limbs of blacks.

### Entrepreneurial Capitalism and Social Differentiation

It is not inequality itself, but its extent and the mode of its institutionalization, that differentiates one society from another. In the northern colonies women were placed in a position legally, socially, and economically inferior to men. The male population itself was divided by age, abilities, and accomplishments. Yet the spectrum of wealth and power in the agricultural sector of the North was much narrower than in the South and the hierarchy of social prestige was not based on the ownership of other men and women. The relative parity among the rural inhabitants of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin suggested in 1759, arose

*first from a more equal distribution of land by the assemblies . . . and secondly from the nature of their occupation; husbandmen with small tracts of land, though they may by industry maintain themselves and families in mediocrity, [have] few means of acquiring great wealth. . . .*

"The hopes of having land of their own and becoming independent of Land lords," observed another writer, "is what chiefly induces people into America."

This commitment to independence as a prime social value had an im-

portant effect on the political life of the local community. Only those who were not dependent on others—in practical terms, those who controlled property—could hope to have a voice in the affairs of the town. This sharp line of demarcation excluded all married women, whose real and personal possessions belonged to their husbands. It also severely restricted the rights of children and of servants, who were the dependents of the male parent in the household in which they lived and worked.

During the seventeenth century the institution of bonded servitude had functioned as a means of introducing children into adult society, training them for their life's work on the farms or in the shops of others, or exposing them to good manners (and a steady diet) in the homes of the well-to-do. The system of indenture also served as a means of providing employment for adult immigrants who did not have resources sufficient to support themselves. In either case, bonded servitude was a step on the bottom of the social or agricultural ladder. . . .

By the middle of the eighteenth century the system of indentured servitude was breaking down as a method of social control. The family unit was unable to assimilate or control the culturally distinct groups which now composed the servant class. Moreover, in the large colonial cities, the majority of the dependent white population was no longer encompassed within the bounds of family government. In Boston in 1771, 29 percent of the adult male population were neither property owners nor the dependents of taxpaying members of the community.

These propertyless men, mostly laborers, seamen, or journeymen artisans who bargained their services for wages, introduced an element of instability into the bottom of the urban social order. Apart from the economic sanctions exercised by employers during the hours of work, there was no institutional method for controlling the activities of these men and their families, many of whom moved from town to town in search of economic subsistence. Of the 188 propertyless men resident in Boston in 1687, only 64 (or 35 percent) were resident in the town eight years later. This rate of persistence was less than half of that of the wealthiest portion of the population, those who were tied to the community by bonds of kinship and of economic investment. A century later the relationship between occupational status and permanence of residence was much the same; of the 546 proletarians in Boston in 1780 only 228 (or 42 percent) remained a decade later.

Given the differing material condition and life style of this floating population of workers, an increase in social disorder was only to be expected. Until the agitation against British rule gave an ideological edge to the anti-authoritarian and unruly activities of this lumpenproletariat, most of its violent energies were directed at other members of the class or against the black population. . . .

The members of this turbulent section of the population were not, as a rule, master mechanics or master craftsmen with established businesses or even the less affluent but stable and respected workingmen who were members

of the dozens of private clubs and societies which had appeared among the urban lower classes. They were, rather, the drifters, the undesirables, the part-time workers, the unfortunate men who lacked the family background or class advantages or individual psychological resources to compete successfully in the harsh and impersonal world of a market economy. To survive, prosper, and thrive in a system based on commercial exchange demanded a very different set of moral and mental attitudes from those required in a culture founded on personal dependence. Life in a contractual society necessitated more calculating behavior than that in a community divided along the lines of inherited or ascribed status; sociability was suddenly less important than self-reliance. The way was open here for a man of great ambition and exceptional abilities to rise in his own lifetime to a position of great wealth. And yet, both individual initiative and the opportunity to exploit it were socially determined; the same opportunities were simply not open to all men.

The career of Thomas Hancock was a prime example of the cumulative advantages bestowed by social class and childhood training. Born in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1703, Hancock was the third son of a Congregationalist minister. Although his two older brothers had been sent to Harvard, Thomas was apprenticed at the age of fourteen to a bookseller. This was a relatively humble, but not an insignificant, beginning. His father's status and educational background had given the young man expectations and aspirations which went far beyond those of most children in the community. The accident of birth gave him greater opportunities as well. . . . After setting up his own business at the end of his seven-year indenture, he made a "good" marriage to the daughter of an established dealer in books and general merchandise.

The solid advantages bestowed by his class background explain only a part of Hancock's subsequent career. The traits of character fashioned during his childhood and young adult years also played a crucial role. He did not—indeed could not—rest content as an ordinary shopkeeper; his ambition was too strong, always prompting him to expand and to diversify his activities. Within a few years he was trading molasses for fish in Newfoundland; importing Dutch tea through St. Eustatius in the West Indies; working on a commission basis for English merchants with interests in Boston; investing in trading ventures; and accumulating his own fleet of merchant ships. Only in 1737, when his fortune was well established, did Hancock pause to erect a testimonial to his success in the form of a mansion on Beacon Hill.

The acquisitive mentality and the capitalistic activities which raised Hancock far above his already substantial origins were, to some extent, merely the latest manifestation of an ethos characteristic of the commercial classes in European society for hundreds of years. The only unique feature of the appearance of these values in America was in the extent of their influence and in the relative absence of a countervailing (if not predominant) ethic of aristocratic leisure and gentility. "The only principle of life propagated among the young people is to get money," Cadwallader Colden reported from New

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York in 1748, "and men are only esteemed according to what they are worth—that is, the money they are possessed of."

The existence of these values and these patterns of behavior had a profound meaning. They hinted at the existence, on an extensive scale, of a new type of modal personality in the northern areas of colonial America. This was the dynamic character structure of the rational entrepreneur, an individual who is at once intensely ambitious, compulsively motivated, and yet cautious and calculating in his business activities.

The roots of this personality structure extended backward to an earlier phase of American (and English) history, to the religious upheavals in the mother country which, during the seventeenth century, led to the migration of dissenting Protestants to the new world. There was, in the communities formed in the American wilderness, a strange blend of old and new ideas, values, and institutions—an accurate reflection of the fact that Puritanism itself represented a key transitional phase in the long and slow evolution from a traditional to a modern conception of life, authority, and personality.

Initially, the transplantation of Puritanism to American soil accentuated the more traditional and conservative elements of this complex and contradictory social movement. In the small isolated agricultural settlements of seventeenth century New England, the father stood at the head of the family, exacting obedience from all those dependent on him; the village leaders, men dignified by age and experience, filled the offices of government and dominated political affairs; the minister directed the spiritual lives of his congregation, arranging their seating in church to reflect before God their standing among men. The pattern of authority and the institutions that gave it expression were one and the same. The key to the Puritan character as it developed in this environment "can be found in the responses of individuals to the series of stern fathers who stood over them in the homes of their childhood, in the church, in society, and in the state."

Children raised in this type of home developed a hyperactive conscience. Charged with personal responsibility for their actions and deeply concerned to avoid offense, they were forced to discriminate for themselves between what their parents would approve or disapprove, between what was "right" and what was "wrong." With the development of full moral autonomy, this process of discrimination became divorced from the system of reinforcement that had engendered it: The individual's conscience (or superego) warned him against moral transgression and urged him on to a continual reform of himself.

This inner psychological dynamic pushed men and women onward in the pursuit of higher standards and demanded excellence and achievement, however those terms were defined. . . . Here then in the childtraining practices and the social values of certain dissenting Protestant sects (and perhaps also a certain class within those religious groups) was an important source of the entrepreneurial character structure. Here also was the threat of boundless discontent—a compulsiveness which could be harnessed only by a strict

organization of activity. "The order which the Quakers are accustomed from childhood to apply to the distribution of their tasks, their thoughts, and every moment of their lives," a peripatetic French visitor to Philadelphia observed, "economizes time, activity and money."

There were many differences between the Congregational creed of Thomas Hancock's father and the Quakerism of the Philadelphia Friends, but their members practiced a similar method of childtraining: a middle path which kept well clear of the extremes of authoritarian repression and parental neglect. Not all of their children became self-reliant adults imbued with a deep need for achievement. Sex roles, birth order, and the wider environment also affected the socialization process; and, in any event, inherited propensities could only be influenced within certain limits. Nonetheless, the results were impressive. Quakers constituted less than one-seventh of the population of Philadelphia in 1769, but they accounted for more than half of those who paid taxes in excess of £100. Of the seventeen wealthiest men in the city, twelve had been raised as Friends. . . .

The new entrepreneurial personality was most prevalent in urban centers and among particular classes and religious groups, but the economic behavior patterns and materialistic values which accompanied (and/or reinforced) it knew no geographic or social limits. . . .

The key elements, in rural and urban areas alike, were the growing scarcity of certain factors of production (which increased the economic leverage of those who controlled them) and the opportunities offered to merchants and creditors to provide processed goods and financial services to an expanding population. In Chester County, for example, the number of taxpayers tripled in the half century following 1730. By 1782 between 25 percent and 35 percent of all taxpayers were either tenant farmers or "innuities"—married artisans or laborers living in dwellings owned by others—who, each month, paid a part of their income in rent to the land- and house-owning members of the community, and yet another part to storekeepers and other creditors in return for services. The established property owners and middle men thus amassed a disproportionate share of the growing wealth of the county. Because of their position they were able to secure—through rents, commission and interest charges, retail markups, and the like—a part of the income of many others.

This method of accumulating wealth was different from that practiced in the slave colonies, where the entire surplus product of the black slave was expropriated by his master. It was, rather, a system of agrarian and commercial capitalism in which a part of the output of many free men was funneled into the hands of a few. By 1774 the poorest 50 percent of all the adults who were potential wealth holders in the colonies of New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania owned only 13 percent of the total wealth of this region, as against the 40 percent held by the richest tenth of the population. But because of the general increase in prosperity (the result, in part, of the entrepreneurial activities of the affluent taxpayers), the standard of living of many members

of the poorer half of the society was higher than that of their parents or grandparents. Concealed behind the increase in inequality (but part of the same process of economic development and social differentiation) was a significant rise in the absolute wealth of the community.

Indeed, it was this facet of the total evolutionary process that was the subject of most contemporary comment. "One half of the wealth of this city is owned by men who wear leather aprons," a contributor to a Philadelphia newspaper claimed in the 1770s, "and the other half by those whose fathers or grandfathers wore leather aprons." However valid as a statement of personal belief, the logic was deceptive and the remark misleading. Those who had benefited substantially from the labor of their parents numbered only 10 percent of the population, and this small group of wealthy taxpayers controlled 54 percent of the city's wealth in 1774. Moreover, even the present generation of artisans and shopkeepers constituted only half of the residents of the community. Below both of these relatively privileged groups were 40 percent of the free adult inhabitants; the members of this sizeable fraction of the society owned a pitiful 4 percent of the total wealth.

It was not this depressed section of the population, however, who controlled the development of Philadelphia or who conceived its myths and values. This was the prerogative of the successful, those long-time residents who saw about them only those craftsmen and storekeepers who had succeeded and not the great numbers who had failed and floated away to other settlements. The descriptions of social reality composed by the members of this literate and articulate section of the community were optimistic not only because of the actual growth and prosperity of the city but also because they assumed that their own experience reflected that of the society as a whole. As always, the myths of the ruling class propagated a distorted, if attractive, version of social existence.

However skewed in their depiction of reality, these myths of social mobility and economic affluence were of crucial importance. They expressed, in an intangible, abstract form, the values and aspirations of the leading part of the community. Grudgingly acquiesced in by ordinary laborers; tacitly accepted by tenant farmers; and wholeheartedly embraced by small landowners, newly arrived indentured servants, hardworking artisans, and ambitious storekeepers, they constituted a set of shared beliefs which obscured (or perhaps justified) the acute differences in their respective material conditions.

Insofar as these elite and entrepreneurial values were internalized by the populace at large or assumed institutionalized form as role expectations of the adult members of the society, they bound this stratified community together and facilitated its continued economic expansion. Thus the White Oaks of Philadelphia—a society of relatively poor if respectable ship carpenters—instituted, as the high point of their year's social activity, an Annual Fishery which was modeled directly on the more elaborate and more prestigious festival celebrated by the gentry of the town. This conscious emulation of the social habits of their betters, this cultural mimesis, testified to the hold

exercised on the minds and emotions of the lower status groups by the values and way of life of the wealthy merchants and gentry. Freer than the black slave, more prosperous than the poor white planter, blessed with a genuine opportunity for social mobility, the urban mechanic was, nevertheless, encompassed in a mental world not entirely of his own making.

### The Social Basis of Provincial Politics

There were several levels of political activity in the colonies, each concerned with a different array of problems and each subject to a separate constituency. On the highest plane, the politics of empire were conducted primarily in London by aristocratic Englishmen and imperial bureaucrats with little personal knowledge of American affairs and by merchants and commercial groups with interests of their own to defend. Through their agents or allies in England the colonists in America had a voice in the deliberations that took place in the Palace, in Parliament, and in the Plantation Office but it was weak and not often heard.

Local politics in America was equally impervious to imperial direction. In hundreds of towns, townships, and counties officials were elected and taxes levied by the resident inhabitants without direction or interference from London. These essentially autonomous systems of political power intersected on the provincial level: in the clash between the royal governor and the representative assemblies of the various colonies. The governor's task was to secure local support for imperial edicts and parliamentary legislation, if possible by persuasion but by patronage, threat, or bribery if necessary. All too often the weapons at his disposal (a few offices and military contracts, his own personal prestige and political abilities) were inadequate to the task.

These difficulties increased over time. No comprehensive and coherent colonial policy was conceived in London for implementation in America, and the patronage at the disposal of the governors was gradually appropriated by English ministers anxious to reward their own friends and supporters. An even more important factor in bringing about a slow decline in imperial authority was the appearance of an indigenous political elite. In the first generations of settlement most of the colonies lacked a distinct governing class or group of political leaders at the provincial level. Successful families might predominate in a given locality and royal governors might gather a small clique of supporters, but the ingredients of a functioning political system—a complex web of interest groups, family alliances, and regional factions—was completely lacking. Thus there was a period of "chaotic" factionalism in which there was "a ruthless competition for dominance, power, and economic advantage among rival groups of leading men, groups which were largely ad hoc and impermanent."

This type of political activity—uncertain, constantly shifting, based on temporary alliances over specific issues—was the mark of a polity in which there was no sure center of social gravity. This chaotic state was characteristic



of patronage, and other governmental actions which could be turned to sectional advantage. It was the prevailing strength of the Hopkins faction, guaranteed finally in the election of 1767, which resulted in the establishment of the College of Rhode Island (Brown University) in Providence rather than in Newport.

Thus the atomistic factionalism of provincial government in Rhode Island, based on the autonomy of small farming communities, had given way under the pressure of economic development to a more coherent political system dominated by merchants, lawyers, and their commercial allies resident in the urban centers. There were similar centralizing and stabilizing forces at work in other colonies as successful families translated their wealth and social prestige into political power on the provincial level. In New York a faction led by the Livingston family and based on support from the Hudson River aristocracy and dissenting religious sects battled for political hegemony with the Delanceys—Episcopalian in religion, mercantile in sympathy, and allied to the landowners of Westchester County. In the absence of political "parties," these family alliances based on social and religious interest groups had come to constitute the structural basis of provincial politics. Here also the diversity of the population made political activity open, competitive, and abusive—not at all conducive to the inculcation of habits of deference among the mass of the voters.

This emergence of an indigenous American polity, based solidly on the accumulated wealth and achieved status of a native-born elite, undermined the power of the royal governor. The deflation of imperial authority was greatest in those colonies, such as Virginia, where there were few differences among the representatives which could be exploited to the advantage of the Crown, but the process was everywhere the same. Only the socially and politically undeveloped colonies could be easily managed in the interest of the mother country....

As old families and established groups tightened their grip on the institutions of government during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, American politics became more elitist and oligarchic. Fewer and fewer settlers could justly observe, with Cadwallader Colden, that "the most opulent families, in our own memory, have risen from the lowest ranks of the people." Even in relatively democratic Connecticut the 600 offices above town level were filled by only 400 different men (because of plural officeholding) in the 1750s; and in any one year over half of these officials were members of the one hundred most prominent families. A few decades later, John Adams remarked:

*Go into every village in New England and you will find that the office of justice of the peace, and even the place of representative, which has ever depended only on the freest election of the people, have generally descended from generation to generation, in three or four families at most.*

of government throughout the colonies, except in the special circumstances created by the existence of the Puritan oligarchy in New England, during the first decades of settlement. It was true in Virginia until 1660 and in Maryland until 1689; it appeared as well upon the colonization of Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and the Carolinas lasting, in each instance, for thirty or forty years. These conditions magnified the importance of the royal or proprietary governors, giving them effective authority out of proportion to the inherent powers of their office. This kaleidoscopic system of politics mirrored, on the governmental level, the unsettled social and economic structure of the community.

As social fluidity crystallized into coherent form, atomistic factionalism gave way to more stable and more predictable types of political activity. This evolution took two forms. In Virginia after 1720 and in South Carolina after 1740 the monopolization of wealth by a group of interrelated families with similar social interests and cultural values brought about the creation of a powerful political elite.... There were differences of opinion among individuals and struggles for power among families, but these contests were muted in tone and essentially superficial in character. They hinged on personal differences among men and not on deep economic, social, or religious cleavages in society.

The second, and more common, evolutionary political form was the emergence of a polity characterized by "stable" factionalism, with two or more relatively permanent interest groups contending for power. The classic case of this process of development was Rhode Island. Until the 1750s provincial politics in this small corporate colony had been virtually nonexistent, in part because of the absence of a strong executive branch of government. Each year the men selected by local communities of farmers predominated in the General Assembly and, in conjunction with the representatives from mercantile Newport, passed the few tax laws and general ordinances that were required. On nine occasions between 1710 and 1751 the agricultural interest enacted paper money bills designed to stimulate trade and relieve agrarian indebtedness; but apart from this particular schism between Newport and its hinterland, there were few permanent divisions within the assembly.

The emergence of Providence as a port city in competition with Newport effected a realignment of economic ties and created a system of factional politics based on sectional advantage. The spread of credit facilities and market contacts inward from the two urban centers prompted an intense civic rivalry which took political form in a bitter contest for control of the elective governorship. In 1755 the post was won by Stephen Hopkins, a merchant of Providence; this victory inaugurated a struggle for the governorship between the Hopkins family and the Ward family of Newport which lasted until the outbreak of the war for independence. The two family factions were agreed on questions of financial policy (succeeding finally in 1763 in winning assembly approval for a bill to control the value of currency) but differed sharply over the grant of monopolies, the apportionment of taxes, the bestowal

Politics had become predictable. The great mass of ordinary men voted for the members of those families who had proved their astuteness in economic affairs and whose large houses and social prestige clearly marked them out for the management of the affairs of state.

The difference between the politics of the northern colonies and those in the South did not lie primarily in the extent of the franchise, but rather in the proportion of men who were genuinely eligible for office. In Virginia, Maryland, and much of South Carolina all of the black population and 75 percent of the white inhabitants were automatically excluded, by color or condition, from an active role in the decision making process. Political life was the prerogative of the privileged members of this quasi-aristocratic society: capable, well-read men who were, in a very real sense, born to rule. In these regions of colonial America a place in the county court or the legislature was effectively limited to nominees chosen from among the top 10 percent of the total adult male population.

The social spectrum of political representation and active participation in the North was about twice as large. The absence of a large slave population and a cultural heritage of independence had resulted in a less highly stratified society; and the greater diversity of economic activities had brought moderate affluence to a greater proportion of the total population, especially in the predominant rural sector. There were the glimmerings of an established oligarchy in New York, with its mass of tenant farmers presided over by members of the Livingston, Van Courtland, or Van Rensselaer families—and even in Massachusetts, where 40 percent of the top officials in thirteen towns were drawn from their four leading families. But there was also more competition for office among men of considerable property and less deference paid to them by those of ordinary means, especially in the heterogeneous middle colonies. If its abusive tone, open character, and social, religious, and sectional diversity occasionally gave the royal or proprietary governor greater leverage and more room to maneuver, the emphasis on local autonomy and the democratic thrust of the provincial politics of the North rendered it as impervious to imperial direction and control as that of the less internally divided colonies to the south.

### Conflict and Consensus

Common allegiance to the British Crown produced similarities in language, culture, and political institutions in the various American colonies, but it could not prevent (or conceal) their fundamental divergences in social development. The economic base and the composition of the population varied from one region to another, and so also did the value systems, behavior patterns, and character structures of their inhabitants. Within each area, however, the fragments, or facets, of social life formed a coherent and interdependent whole. Each of these social systems had a number of functionally

critical qualities; and these can be isolated, as a set of abstractions, for comparison and contrast. . . .

Despite reliance on force and a strict caste division between the races, the society of the southern American colonies was not plural in character. The widely dispersed black population was unable to maintain a viable religion and culture of its own. Moreover, the gradual acculturation of native-born slaves through the total-institution of slavery gradually lessened the crude dependence on force. As time passed, elements of "consensus" and the crude dependence began to infuse the system of social control. This was of moral persuasion began to infuse the system of social control. This was especially the case among the poor white planters who quickly learned to accept their subordinate place in the social hierarchy. Thus, although sharply divided along the lines of race and class, this society (except in the back-country) was relatively stable; conflict was latent, not manifest.

By contrast, New England society was a model of the consensus made possible by homogeneity. British troops were never stationed in these settlements until 1768 and their presence then was an important factor in bringing about armed revolt by the xenophobic resident population. There had been previous outbreaks of violence against customs officials and other royal bureaucrats, likewise the agents of an alien and external power. There had also been a good many uprisings which were extrainsitutional in character: "nobs" composed of a fair cross-section of the population took action, for example, against deviant elements (such as prostitutes, carriers of contagious diseases, and those who sought to hoard food or manipulate its price) who seemed to constitute a danger to the moral or physical health of the community. As a rule these mass police actions received the tacit support of the local officials. Lacking a powerful constabulary and overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon, and dissenting Protestant in composition, these communities mobilized the entire body politic for the task of preserving order.

This system of social self-control was possible because of the relative uniformity of thought and condition among the members of these towns. Access to many communities in New England was strictly regulated by the resident population, and undesirable aliens were constantly "warned out." These rigid standards of social (and often religious) selection were designed to insure that these settlements remained restricted to like-minded inhabitants. This quest for unanimity was bolstered by a religious ideology which stressed self-restraint and selflessness in dealings with others, by a system of childtraining which fostered a strong moral conscience and an acute sense of right and wrong; and by cultural habits and social expectations which placed a high value on conformity to accepted standards. Once the members of a town meeting had achieved consensus on a given issue, their decision assumed an ethical significance all were bound to respect.

Those who would not heed the voice of the community were encouraged to leave or, upon occasion, actually expelled. There was no toleration of diversity in this homogeneous region, no philosophical commitment to the rule of the majority. "The major part of those who were present were



[farmers],” the merchants of Salem, Massachusetts, argued when protesting against a tax schedule which imposed high rates on their financial assets, “and the vote then passed was properly their vote and not the vote of the whole body of the town.” The metaphor—with its implication of a mutually dependent and interconnected polity in which the well-being of one member affected the condition of all—was completely appropriate. It reflected the social and cultural homogeneity of most of rural New England and the intuitive rejection by most of its inhabitants of a world in which there was a diversity of value systems; they had no historical experience of such complexity.

The cultural difference between the original Dutch settlers and their English conquerors had helped to provoke Leisler's rebellion in New York in 1689; and the result had been permanent stationing of a detachment of British troops in the colony. Subsequent migration of thousands of Germans and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians into Dutch New York (and the neighboring provinces of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, which were already the home of a sizable Quaker population) introduced even more diversity into the social complexity of this region. And yet these colonies never degenerated into plural societies ruled only by naked force.

New England democracy, a “democracy devoid of legitimate difference, dissent, and conflict,” had a very different character from that developed by the more heterogeneous society of the middle colonies. A political system based on compromise and accommodation gradually (and grudgingly) emerged in this area during the course of the eighteenth century, giving institutional legitimacy and an encompassing constitutional form to its cultural diversity. Political factionalism was rife in these provinces—was perhaps more intense here than anywhere in the British empire—but these legislative struggles served to prevent a resort to physical force and political coercion. All religious and cultural factions, even eventually the rough Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of the frontier regions, were accepted into the polity on the basis of equality. Consensus was limited to representation and participation; not, as in New England, to the substance of politics. But this was sufficient to preserve social stability while generating a competitive type of politics which eventually produced (in the persons of Aaron Burr, DeWitt Clinton, and Martin Van Buren) the first really professional politicians in American history.

If the middle colonies lacked the homogeneous solidarity of New England or the enforced stability of southern slave society during the eighteenth century, these provinces were also spared their rigorous psychological or martial systems of social control. The internal coherence of the middle colonies did not derive from the existence of dependent personalities created by huge disparities in wealth and status or from the institutionalized violence of slavery; nor did it rely on invocation of a conformity in thought and action which stultified individual self-expression by channeling it into accepted forms. It was not completely accidental that the freedom of the press to criticize

government officials was first clearly enunciated in New York—in the Zenger case of 1735. And the grounds of defense, which admitted the libel but justified it as being true, adumbrated a new principle of law. Forced by the contingencies of history to deal with diversity, the inhabitants of the middle colonies were slowly accommodating their laws, political systems, and personal mental outlooks to their unpredictable new world of social and cultural complexity.

At midcentury these problems had assumed a new sense of urgency, not only in the middle colonies, but also in areas less well-equipped by experience or inclination to deal with them. Beginning in 1740 there were a series of interrelated crises in American society as the inherent tendencies of two generations of rapid population growth, extensive economic development, and increased social diversity rushed forward to fulfillment. In more than one colony these new tensions were to pull the inherited web of social authority and political power to the breaking point.

